

Integrating Social Issues in English Language Teaching to Enhance Students' Critical Awareness

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Abstract

English Language Teaching often emphasizes linguistic competence while overlooking students' awareness of social issues embedded in real-life communication. As a result, English learning may become detached from students' social realities and critical engagement with societal challenges. This research aims to explore the integration of social issues in English Language Teaching and its contribution to enhancing students' critical awareness in the classroom. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed to examine teaching practices that incorporated social topics such as inequality, environmental issues, and cultural diversity into English learning activities. The participants consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in a general English course at a university. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of students' written and oral tasks. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to students' engagement, critical responses, and language use during learning activities. The findings reveal that integrating social issues into English Language Teaching encouraged students to actively participate in classroom discussions, express opinions, and reflect on social realities using English. Students demonstrated improved critical awareness, as shown by their ability to analyze problems, express perspectives, and connect language learning with social contexts. Additionally, the integration of social studies content made English learning more meaningful and relevant to students' lives. The research concludes that combining social issues with English instruction supports both language development and critical consciousness, suggesting the need for pedagogical approaches that position English learning as a tool for social understanding and civic engagement.

Keywords: Social Issues; English Language Teaching; Critical Awareness

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, English Language Teaching has experienced significant shifts in orientation, moving beyond the sole focus on grammatical accuracy and communicative competence toward more meaningful and contextualized language use. English is no longer viewed merely as a neutral tool for communication but as a language deeply embedded in social, cultural, political, and ideological contexts (Bahri & Sugeng, 2009; English, 2020; Katawazai et al., 2019). Despite this development, many English classrooms, particularly in higher education contexts, still prioritize language form and test-oriented outcomes, often neglecting the social dimensions of language learning. As a result, English instruction risks becoming detached from students' lived experiences and the social realities they encounter in their daily lives. At the same time, contemporary societies face increasingly complex social challenges such as inequality, environmental degradation, cultural conflict, gender issues, and digital citizenship. University students are expected not only to master academic knowledge but also to develop critical awareness, social responsibility, and the ability to engage thoughtfully with societal issues. Social studies as a field emphasizes critical thinking, civic engagement, and the examination of social phenomena from multiple perspectives. However, social issues are often taught separately from language education, creating a disconnect between language learning and social understanding. This

separation limits the potential of English as a medium through which students can explore, question, and respond to real-world problems.

Integrating social issues into English Language Teaching offers a promising pedagogical approach to address this gap. By incorporating topics drawn from social studies into English learning activities, students are provided with authentic content that encourages meaningful communication. Such integration allows learners to practice language skills while simultaneously developing awareness of social realities. English becomes a tool for inquiry, discussion, and reflection rather than an abstract subject focused solely on linguistic structures (Bahar & Husain, 2021; Shi & Cheung, 2024). This approach aligns with the growing emphasis on education that fosters critical awareness, global citizenship, and interdisciplinary learning. However, in many educational contexts, particularly where English is taught as a foreign language, teachers may hesitate to introduce social issues into the classroom. Concerns about students' language proficiency, limited instructional time, curriculum constraints, and lack of pedagogical guidance often discourage the integration of socially oriented content. As a result, English lessons may rely heavily on decontextualized texts and artificial dialogues that fail to engage students intellectually or emotionally. This situation highlights the need for research that explores how social issues can be meaningfully integrated into English Language Teaching without compromising language learning objectives.

Furthermore, students' critical awareness is often underdeveloped in traditional English classrooms. While learners may demonstrate adequate reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills, they may struggle to analyze texts critically, express informed opinions, or connect language use with broader social contexts. This limitation becomes increasingly problematic in a globalized world where English functions as a language of information exchange, academic discourse, and social advocacy. Students who lack critical awareness may consume information passively rather than engaging with it analytically (Adil et al., 2016; Babanoğlu et al., 2025). Therefore, English Language Teaching must evolve to support not only linguistic competence but also critical engagement with content. The integration of social studies into English Language Teaching also responds to the interdisciplinary demands of modern education. Higher education institutions increasingly emphasize cross-disciplinary learning to prepare students for complex real-world challenges. English, as a flexible and widely used language, offers an ideal medium for interdisciplinary exploration. Through discussions of social issues, students can develop vocabulary, discourse strategies, and communicative confidence while engaging in higher-order thinking processes such as analysis, evaluation, and reflection. This dual benefit underscores the pedagogical value of integrating ELT and social studies.

Despite its potential advantages, empirical research examining the integration of social issues in English Language Teaching remains limited, particularly in contexts where English is not the primary language of instruction. Existing research often focuses on language outcomes such as vocabulary acquisition or speaking fluency, with less attention given to students' critical awareness and social engagement (Afzal, 2019; Budianto, 2023; Nurdini et al., 2017). There is also a lack of detailed classroom-based research that documents how students respond to socially oriented English instruction and how such integration shapes their learning experiences. This gap indicates the need for systematic research that investigates the pedagogical impact of integrating social studies content into English classrooms. Therefore, this research is important because it addresses both pedagogical and societal needs. Pedagogically, it provides insights into how English Language Teaching can be designed to foster meaningful learning through socially relevant

content. Socially, it highlights the role of English education in developing critically aware individuals who can engage with social issues using the global language of communication. By examining the integration of social issues in English Language Teaching, this research contributes to ongoing discussions about the purpose of language education in contemporary society and supports the development of teaching practices that are linguistically effective, socially responsive, and educationally transformative.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Previous research in English Language Teaching has increasingly highlighted the importance of contextualized learning that connects language instruction with meaningful content. Many researchers have examined content-based English instruction and found that the use of real-world topics enhances students' engagement and motivation (Izzuddin Izzuddin et al., 2023; Kubsch et al., 2023). In several educational contexts, integrating non-linguistic content into English classrooms has been shown to encourage more active participation, promote communicative competence, and support deeper comprehension of texts. These findings suggest that English learning becomes more effective when students interact with authentic issues rather than isolated linguistic forms. Research focusing on the intersection of English Language Teaching and social studies has emphasized the role of language as a medium for social inquiry and critical thinking. Studies have shown that discussing social issues in English classrooms helps students develop argumentative skills, express opinions, and reflect on diverse perspectives. Through tasks such as debates, problem-solving activities, and reflective writing, learners are encouraged to use English as a tool to analyze social realities. These approaches have also been associated with increased learner autonomy and confidence in expressing complex ideas.

Other research has explored the development of critical awareness in language education. Findings indicate that students exposed to socially oriented content tend to demonstrate greater sensitivity to social problems and a stronger ability to evaluate information critically. Language classrooms that encourage questioning, discussion, and reflection have been found to foster higher-order thinking skills (Byfield et al., 2016; Kusuma, 2022; Pun et al., 2024). However, much of this research has been conducted in general education or humanities contexts, with limited focus on how critical awareness is cultivated specifically through English instruction. Despite these contributions, several gaps remain in existing research. First, there is limited classroom-based research that systematically examines how social issues are integrated into English Language Teaching practices and how students respond to such integration. Second, many studies focus primarily on linguistic outcomes, paying less attention to the development of students' critical awareness as a central learning objective. Third, there is a lack of research that explicitly positions English Language Teaching as a bridge between language learning and social studies, particularly in higher education contexts where interdisciplinary learning is increasingly emphasized.

Based on these gaps, this research addresses the following research questions: (1) How are social issues integrated into English Language Teaching activities? (2) How does the integration of social issues influence students' critical awareness in English classrooms? (3) What are students' responses toward the use of social issues in English learning? The purpose of this research is to explore the integration of social studies content in English Language Teaching and to examine its contribution to enhancing students' critical awareness and meaningful engagement with English learning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the integration of social issues in English Language Teaching and its influence on students' critical awareness. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of classroom practices, student responses, and the meanings constructed through language use (Seixas et al., 2018). This design enabled the researchers to capture rich, contextual data that reflected the complexity of teaching and learning processes involving social studies content in English instruction. The participants of this research were undergraduate students enrolled in a general English course at a university. The participants came from diverse academic backgrounds, which allowed the research to examine how social issues were interpreted and discussed by students with varying perspectives. The English course was designed to focus on basic communicative skills, making it an appropriate setting to investigate how social issues could be integrated without overwhelming learners' language proficiency levels. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling to ensure that students had experienced English learning activities that incorporated social topics (Campbell et al., 2020; Etikan, 2016).

Data were collected using multiple instruments to ensure credibility and depth of analysis. Classroom observations were conducted to document teaching strategies, learning activities, and student interactions during lessons that integrated social issues. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with selected students to explore their perceptions, attitudes, and learning experiences related to the use of social topics in English classrooms. In addition, students' written assignments and oral presentations were collected as documents to examine how they expressed critical awareness and social understanding through English. The data analysis process followed thematic analysis procedures (Miles et al., 2014). All collected data were first organized and transcribed to ensure accuracy. The researchers then conducted open coding to identify recurring patterns related to instructional practices, student engagement, language use, and critical responses to social issues. These codes were grouped into broader themes that represented key aspects of the integration of social studies in English Language Teaching. To enhance trustworthiness, data triangulation was applied by comparing findings from observations, interviews, and document analysis. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm the accuracy of the findings. Through this systematic approach, the research produced a comprehensive understanding of how social issues were integrated into English instruction and how such integration contributed to students' critical awareness.

FINDINGS

The findings of this research reveal how social issues were integrated into English Language Teaching and how this integration influenced students' engagement and critical awareness. The analysis of classroom observations, interviews, and students' learning products indicates that social issues served as a meaningful foundation for English learning activities, enabling students to use the language as a tool for understanding and discussing real-world problems. One major finding concerns the ways social issues were embedded in classroom activities. Social topics such as environmental sustainability, social inequality, cultural diversity, and digital responsibility were introduced through reading texts, short videos, and discussion prompts. These materials functioned not only as language input but also as triggers for critical reflection. Students were encouraged to identify problems presented in the materials, discuss causes and consequences, and propose possible solutions

using English. This approach shifted the focus of English lessons from mechanical language practice to purposeful communication, where students used English to convey ideas and perspectives related to social realities.

Another important finding relates to students' participation and engagement. The integration of social issues significantly increased students' willingness to participate in classroom discussions. Many students who were previously passive during traditional language exercises became more active when discussing social topics that were familiar or personally relevant. Classroom observations showed that students asked more questions, responded to peers' opinions, and expressed agreement or disagreement using English. This indicates that social issues provided an emotional and cognitive connection that motivated students to communicate, even when their linguistic resources were limited. The findings also show a noticeable development in students' critical awareness. Through repeated exposure to social issues, students demonstrated an improved ability to analyze problems rather than merely describe them. In written tasks, students began to articulate reasons, consequences, and personal viewpoints instead of providing simple summaries. Oral presentations revealed that students could link social issues to their own experiences and local contexts, demonstrating an emerging understanding of how global issues relate to their daily lives. This suggests that the integration of social studies content supported the development of higher-order thinking skills alongside language learning.

Another finding highlights how language use evolved during socially oriented English instruction. Students gradually expanded their vocabulary related to social topics and became more confident in using expressions of opinion, agreement, and evaluation. Although grammatical errors were still present, communication became clearer and more purposeful. Students prioritized meaning-making over linguistic perfection, indicating a shift in their perception of English from a subject to be mastered into a medium for expressing ideas. This change was particularly evident during group discussions, where students focused on exchanging viewpoints rather than avoiding mistakes. Students' responses gathered through interviews further supported these findings. Many participants expressed that learning English through social issues made lessons more interesting and meaningful. They reported that discussing real-life problems helped them understand the relevance of English beyond exams and classroom requirements. Several students stated that social topics encouraged them to think more deeply and reflect on issues they had previously taken for granted. This reflective process strengthened their motivation to engage with English learning activities.

However, the findings also reveal challenges in integrating social issues into English Language Teaching. Some students initially struggled to express complex ideas due to limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. In such cases, students relied on simplified language or mixed English with their first language to convey meaning. While this code-switching helped maintain communication, it also highlighted the need for pedagogical support to scaffold language development. Additionally, a few students felt uncomfortable discussing sensitive social topics, indicating that topic selection and classroom atmosphere play crucial roles in successful integration. Overall, the findings demonstrate that integrating social issues into English Language Teaching positively influenced students' engagement, language use, and critical awareness. English classrooms became spaces where language learning and social understanding were interconnected, allowing students to develop communicative competence while engaging with meaningful content. The results suggest that social issues can serve as powerful pedagogical resources that enrich English learning and support students' intellectual and social development.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research highlight the significant pedagogical value of integrating social issues into English Language Teaching, particularly in fostering students' critical awareness and meaningful language use. The novelty of this research lies in its explicit positioning of English Language Teaching as an interdisciplinary space where language learning and social studies intersect. While previous research has often treated social issues as supplementary materials, this research demonstrates that social content can function as the central framework of English instruction without diminishing linguistic development (Debbagh, 2016; Maesaroh et al., 2022; Nartiningrum & Nugroho, 2021; Yulianto et al., 2020). This approach redefines English classrooms as sites of both language acquisition and social inquiry. From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the understanding of language learning as a socially situated process. The findings support the view that language is best learned when it is used to engage with meaningful content and authentic social contexts. By embedding social issues into English instruction, students were encouraged to move beyond surface-level communication and engage in higher-order thinking processes such as analysis, evaluation, and reflection. This reinforces the idea that critical awareness is not an additional outcome but an integral component of effective language learning. The research also extends theoretical discussions on content-based instruction by emphasizing the role of social studies content in shaping students' communicative purposes and discourse practices.

In terms of practical contribution, this research provides valuable insights for English educators seeking to make their teaching more relevant and socially responsive. The findings suggest that integrating social issues can increase student engagement, particularly among learners who may feel disconnected from traditional language exercises. Teachers can use social topics to stimulate discussion, encourage opinion expression, and create opportunities for collaborative learning (Abdelhalim & Alsahil, 2025; Giri Aditama et al., 2023; Ira Irzawati et al., 2024; Tuna & Razi, 2016). This approach also helps students perceive English as a tool for understanding and addressing social realities rather than merely a subject focused on grammatical accuracy. Furthermore, the research offers implications for curriculum development in higher education. English courses can be designed to include socially relevant themes that align with institutional goals related to critical thinking, civic engagement, and interdisciplinary learning. By doing so, English Language Teaching can contribute more directly to the development of socially aware graduates who are capable of using English to participate in global and local conversations about social issues. The discussion emphasizes that integrating social studies into English instruction is not only pedagogically effective but also socially meaningful, positioning English education as a transformative practice that connects language learning with social responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the integration of social issues in English Language Teaching and examined its role in enhancing students' critical awareness within university-level classrooms. The findings demonstrate that incorporating social studies content into English instruction creates meaningful learning experiences that connect language use with real-world contexts. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic form, students were encouraged to use English as a medium for discussing, analyzing, and reflecting on social realities. This shift contributed to increased engagement, active participation, and a deeper understanding of both language and content. The research revealed that students responded positively to

socially oriented English instruction. Social issues such as environmental concerns, inequality, and cultural diversity stimulated discussion and motivated students to express opinions, even when their language proficiency was limited. Through repeated exposure to socially relevant topics, students developed greater confidence in using English to articulate ideas and perspectives. More importantly, they demonstrated emerging critical awareness, shown by their ability to identify problems, consider multiple viewpoints, and relate social issues to their own experiences. These outcomes indicate that English Language Teaching can effectively support both linguistic development and critical thinking when integrated with social studies content.

The conclusion also highlights the broader implications of integrating social issues into English instruction. English classrooms can serve as spaces for interdisciplinary learning where students not only acquire language skills but also develop social sensitivity and civic responsibility. This approach aligns with the goals of higher education to produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also socially aware and engaged. By positioning English as a tool for social inquiry, educators can help students understand the relevance of language learning in addressing contemporary societal challenges. Despite the limitations of this research, its findings contribute to ongoing discussions about the purpose and direction of English Language Teaching. The research underscores the need for pedagogical practices that move beyond traditional language instruction and embrace socially meaningful content. Future research may expand on these findings by exploring different educational contexts, student populations, and instructional models. Overall, this research concludes that integrating social issues into English Language Teaching is a valuable and transformative approach that enhances students' critical awareness while supporting meaningful language learning.

LIMITATION AND SUGGESTIONS

This research has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the participants were limited to university students enrolled in a general English course, which restricts the generalizability of the results to other educational levels or institutional contexts. Students' academic backgrounds and varying levels of English proficiency may have influenced their engagement with social issues and their ability to express critical ideas in English. Second, the research focused on a limited range of social issues selected by the instructor, which may not represent the full spectrum of social topics relevant to students' lives. Third, the qualitative nature of the research relied heavily on observations, interviews, and learning artifacts, which, while providing rich insights, may involve subjective interpretation despite efforts to ensure trustworthiness through triangulation.

Based on these limitations, several suggestions are proposed for future research and pedagogical practice. Future research is encouraged to involve a wider range of participants across different academic disciplines, educational levels, and institutional settings to examine how social issue integration functions in diverse contexts. Researchers may also consider employing mixed-method approaches to complement qualitative findings with quantitative data, such as surveys or assessments of critical awareness development. Additionally, future research could explore the long-term impact of socially integrated English instruction on students' language proficiency and civic engagement. For teaching practice, English educators are encouraged to carefully select social issues that are contextually appropriate and inclusive, while providing sufficient linguistic scaffolding to support students in expressing complex ideas. Professional development programs may

also be designed to equip teachers with strategies for integrating social studies content into English instruction effectively and responsibly.

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